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"A LITTLE PLACE GETTING SMALLER" PERCEPTIONS OF PLACE AND THE DEPOPULATION OF GOVE COUNTY, KANSAS

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Go west on Interstate 70, past Salina and Highway 81, the unofficial line of demarcation between eastern and western Kansas. Beyond Bob Dole's childhood home of Russell and the regional center of Hays you will come to Gove County. Though the highway is littered with advertisements for Colby and Goodland, towns that lie farther west, nothing signals the unsuspecting driver that Gove County is approaching. Nothing sings the praises of Gove County's industries, historic figures, or the local quality of life. You simply pass from Trego County into Gove County, your arrival marked by a single sign reading "Gove County Line." If you continue on, your view of the High Plains from I-70 is disturbed only occasionally by the exit signs for the county's five communities: Quinter, Park, Gove City, Grainfield, and Grinnell (Fig. 1).

Key Words: ethnographic interviews, rural development, rural population, sense of place, spatialization

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Although Gove County is indeed composed of the five towns listed from the highway, its story is much more than small-town topography. Gove County represents much of the Great Plains. While rural America in general saw a gain in population between 1990 and 2000, the Great Plains was one of only three subareas that witnessed continued depopulation. Gove County, which lost 10 percent of its population, ranked ninety-sixth out of 105 counties in the state of Kansas in population change between 2000 and 2005.[1] It was one of forty-seven counties in Kansas that lost more than 1 percent of their populations between 1990 and 2000, and one of only ten to have lost another 10 percent in the first five years of the new century.

The history of Gove County, although celebrated locally in a museum and in the county's annual "Old Settler's Days," is not an auspicious one. The county was founded by gubernatorial decree on September 2, 1886, and

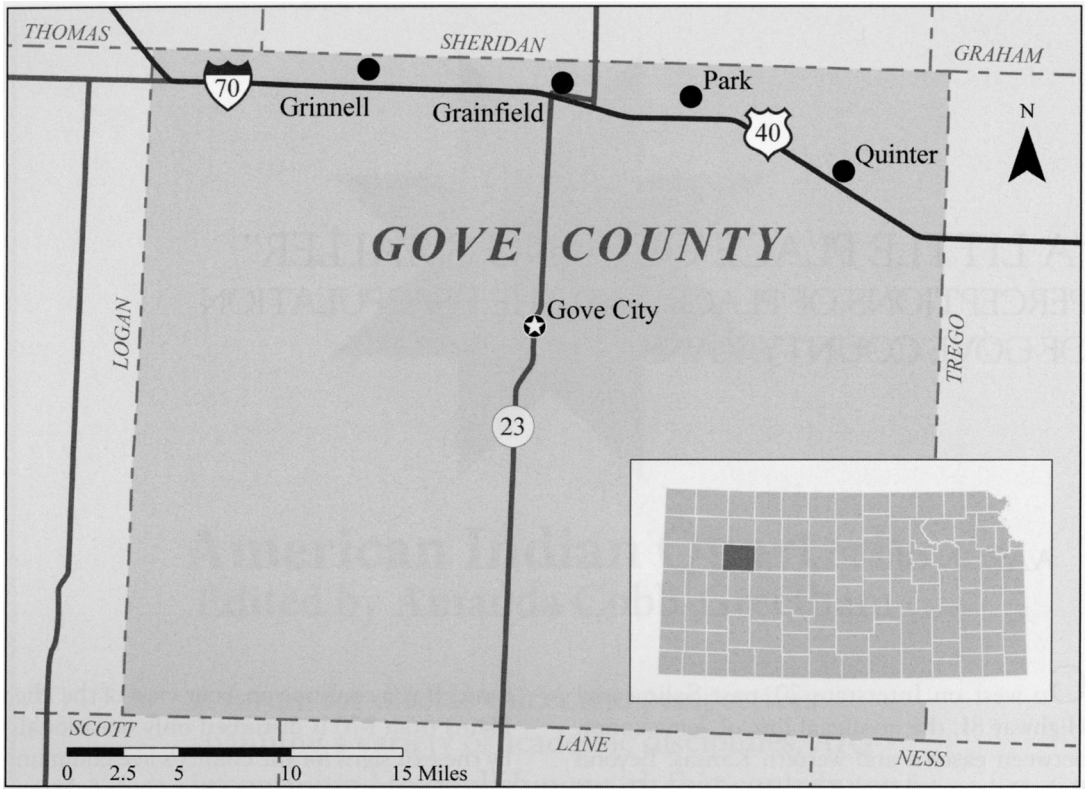

FIG. 1. *A map of Gove County, Kansas.* Map by Travis M. White. Printed with permission.

reached its largest recorded population in 1910, with a total of 6,044. But with the exception of a brief surge leading up to the 1930 census, the county's population has been declining ever since. Even more disturbing, this process seems to be accelerating. Between 1980 and 2005, Gove County lost 27 percent of its population, which today sits at 2,721. In many ways, local residents under the age of eighty have never known a Gove County that was not in some form of decline.

Population losses in rural counties can be particularly traumatic because of their small base-populations. If suburban Johnson County, outside Kansas City, loses 200 people over five years, no one notices. If Gove County loses 200 people, it has lost over 7 percent of its population. A loss that size affects the local tax base, which has repercussions in the services the county and its towns can offer. Services are further reduced when residents are forced to spend their dollars in more populous counties, siphoning potential sales tax from their home coffers. Loss of population also has severe effects on local schools and hospitals. Like many counties in the Great Plains in the last thirty years, the residents of Gove County have witnessed business closings and school consolidation and have struggled to maintain their local hospital and nursing home. The ramifications of these struggles only intensify when a depopulated county is also an aging one.

Rural depopulation occurs for a myriad of reasons ranging from global economic forces to the cultural pressures to be "cool" applied to youth by national media outlets.[2] Rather than focusing on external factors, however, this study seeks to explore the way in which Gove County residents' views of their community might contribute to its ongoing decline. I argue

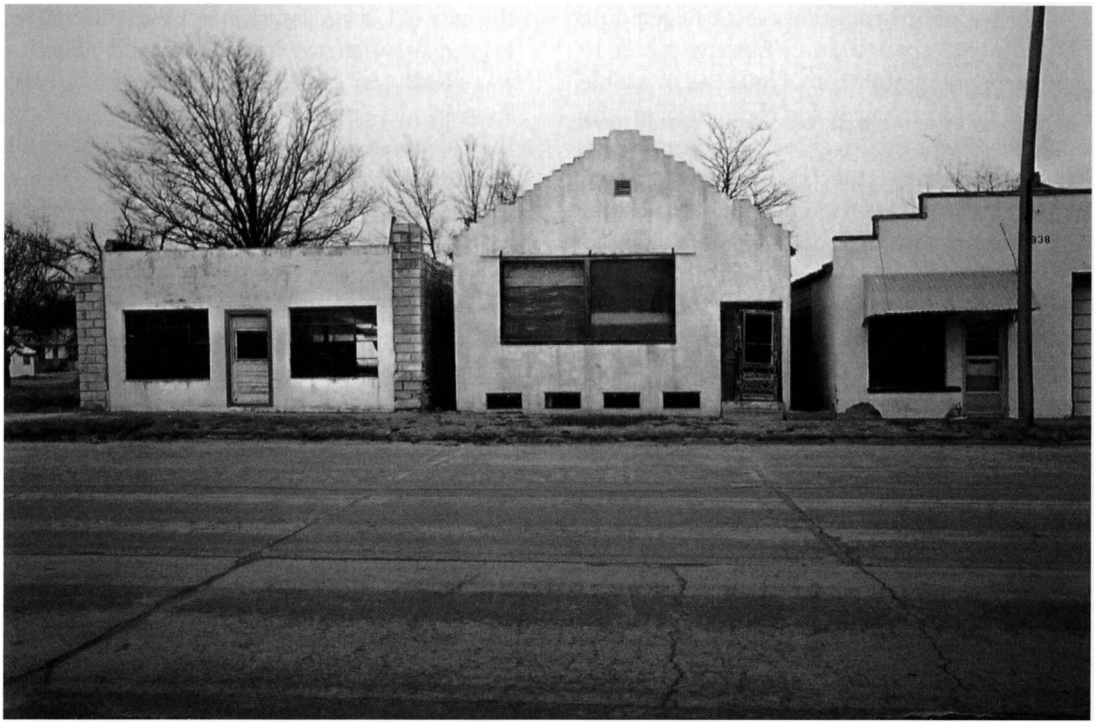

FIG. 2. *Shuttered storefronts in downtown Gove City.* Photograph by the author.

that the way in which residents conceive of Gove County has helped to speed its demise. Rob Shields offers a theoretical perspective for the way that meanings are attached to certain places, and more importantly, how those meanings can influence the development of the places to which they are attached. He has called this process *social spatialization*, and it is this framework that I use in my assessment of Gove County.[3]

In developing his theory, Shields focused on "marginal" places, ones "on the periphery of cultural systems" (3). His social spatialization involves "a fundamental set of spatial divisions and distinctions" that "are most visible in spatial practices and in the connotations people associate with places and regions in everyday talk" (46). Spatialization is manifested in what he called place-images and place-myths. Place-images are "the various discrete meanings associated with real places or regions regardless of their character in reality" (60). They often endure long after their source material has changed. In this study, I view as place-images the values that the inhabitants of Gove County associate with their county. A place-myth is constructed of various place-images, and "form[s] a mythology or formation of positions which polarizes and dichotomizes different places and spaces" (62). Thus place-myths create enduring distinctions between places. These images and myths can and do change over time, though often a lack of change can indicate the strength of their ideological or hegemonic power. What was most important to Shields in explaining the endurance of a place-myth is that "it is not proposed as just a cognitive structure which individuals learn" but as "a set of practical paradigms and algorithms coordinating group activities and sites (what to do, when and where). . . . It is a social framework more than a mental structure" (63). Social spatialization does not exist just in the mind; it is also manifested in the daily routines of how people interact with places.

Because of its endurance and hegemonic nature, social spatialization has the power to limit a people's ability to conceive of viable options or alternatives for their own or any other place, especially those on the margins. The concept, then, has the ability to explain some but not all of the cultural factors that contribute to the underdevelopment or marginalization of an area. I conducted field interviews in Gove County over five trips in the summer and fall of 2006, during which I interviewed sixteen informants in twelve interviews in order to understand local place-images and myths and how these concepts may have affected Gove's economic development.

My primary guide in Gove County was a local farmer to whom I was introduced by a mutual acquaintance. It was through this farmer that I recruited participants for my interviews. Though my goal was to interview as wide a variety of informants as possible within the time constraints of my thesis, my guide had some control over whom I interviewed. Initially, for example, he thought that I only wanted to talk with people in positions of power within the community, so his first round of suggestions included a county commissioner, a banker, a doctor, a newspaper publisher, and a mayor. These were all valuable informants, but I wanted the widest possible variety of people, and was eventually able to convince him to introduce me to other types of informants.

Readers should also be aware that interviews are mutually constructed documents. As Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli has explained, "There is no oral history before the encounter of two different subjects, one with a story to tell, and another with a story to construct."[4] Because of this double construction, it is critical that an investigator be aware of social differences between himself and his informants. Distinctions in class, race, gender, and political ideology can all affect the kind and reliability of information that an informant might offer. In other words, an interviewee is always "reading" an interviewer as much as an investigator is learning about an informant. In the case of Gove County, numerous differences existed between my informants and myself. I was clearly an outsider, and could not really feign insider status. The resulting documents, then, depended as much on how my informants read me as it did on the questions I asked.

Though I was often introduced as being interested in depopulation, my interview questions focused more on how my informants viewed their county or community in general, and then moved to the ways that it had changed over time. Questions were designed to be as open-ended as possible. If I did not understand what informants meant, I tried to get them to elaborate or explain their terminology. Each interview was different, but my goal was always for my informants to talk as much as possible. Often, depending on the interests of my informants, we would go on long tangents. These tangents frequently proved useful, as they offered some nuance into how my informants saw the community, how they saw the outside world, or how they were reading me as interviewer.[5]

Kent Ryden has argued that "personal experience stories reveal place-anchored emotions which are common to the group of local residents and therefore to the place as a whole."[6] This is not to say that everyone in a place experiences it in the same way, but rather that recurring themes or discourses in individual responses almost assuredly reflect place-myths and images that hold some kind of hegemonic sway in the community's general sense of place or social spatialization.

Even with the various potential pitfalls of the interviewing process, the values (place-images) and place-myths that the residents of Gove County associate with their county were not hard to ascertain. When asked about the strengths of the county, or what makes it and its inhabitants unique, respondents' answers were so remarkably consistent that it is hard not to see the hegemonic power of their chosen replies. Just as geographer James Shortridge has noted that national attitudes toward the Middle West reflect a strong sense of pastoralism,[7] Gove County place-myths and value

systems (place-images) also center around residents' view of themselves as an agricultural county. Their ideals are those of Jeffersonian agrarianism, the belief that farming produces wholesome, value-oriented, independent people.

Sometimes in responding to questions of uniqueness, my informants dwelled on physical attributes of the community. For the most part, though, when asked what values or strengths they associated with the county, residents listed aspects of their rural agricultural lifestyle. Interestingly, these qualities have not significantly changed from those Shortridge found for Great Plains residents in a 1980 survey.[8] The qualities listed were a profound sense of community, a sense of integrity in the county, a rugged individualism, and a spirit of volunteerism that one respondent associated with a "get 'r done attitude." They all celebrated the work ethic of western Kansans, and agreed that to live in Gove County, one had to forgo many of the luxuries other people take for granted. Gove County residents regularly contrasted these place-images and place-myths with their perceptions of urban communities, showing how the process of social spatialization often creates dichotomies of places.

In what follows, I let the members of the Gove County community explain, one by one, the place-images they associate with their county. In doing so, I hope to give voice to a group that has not always been allowed to speak for itself in academic discourse. Although popular writers such as Least Heat-Moon, Duncan, and Dickensen have quoted rural residents extensively, they have often done so uncritically.[9] In contrast, Norris is certainly critical of the members of her rural community, but she does not give them much room to talk.[10] The same is true for classic academic work on Great Plains depopulation, such as the Poppers' opus on the Buffalo Commons.[11] After the people of Gove County have explained the values and place-images that make up their place-myth for Gove County, I conclude with an analysis of how that place-myth has affected the county.

A Real Sense of Community

The first value mentioned by almost all informants when asked about Gove County was its sense of community. When probed about this, the residents of Gove County agreed that it came from the feeling that, because of the small population of the county, everyone knew everybody else. According to one Gove City resident, "You don't have a lot of people, so you really personally know everybody within ten miles of here." Almost all respondents agreed that you could not have this sense of community in an urban area. One informant stated, "I don't think my kids [who live in Kansas City] can tell you the names of all of their neighbors that live across the street or within a house one way or the other, or the next houses after that." A housewife in Gove City wondered about the sense of community in a larger city. "Because I do think [that in] your bigger cities you don't have that common companionship or dealing with people in a friendly manner. You know, watching young people grow up and stuff."

Several informants told me stories or parables to illustrate that their sense of community was something that could not be found in urban settings. One example came from the mayor of one of the towns, who told me a story about a family from Kentucky who pulled off the highway to get gas on their way to Colorado. After talking with him for several hours, he claimed that they were convinced to move to the town so that their kids could go to school in a place where they were almost guaranteed a spot on the high school basketball team. I heard several stories of this type. It seemed important for the residents to believe that their communities, although small, offered positive qualities that other more urban areas could not, and could draw people away from those urban areas.

A Safe Place to Live

A common place-image that Gove County residents share with real glee with outsiders

is their sense of security, which comes from knowing everyone in the community. As one man put it, "If the door's not locked, I'm not worried about it." A Gove City resident and teacher at Wheatland Elementary told me a story of when her family went to Disney World and left the keys in their cars and the doors to their house unlocked. She seemed to take particular joy in the shock that other tourists at Disney World exhibited upon hearing that story. Other residents talked of going to a local community activity and leaving their keys in their car. There was clearly a sense that this was not something that could be done in other parts of the United States.

Most respondents agreed that children were the ones who really benefited from Gove County's security. One Gove City resident, in describing his own childhood, said, "You don't got to worry about anything really happening, like as in people getting kidnapped or anything. . . . It's not like you had to stay in the backyard necessarily. We kind of went around all over town."[12] Elaborating on how that differs from other areas, he explained what it is like in a more urban setting. "It's a little different whenever you come from being out here and go to Topeka, places like that, to visit. I've got relatives there and stuff, and it's different. 'Cuz there, their kids, they're confined to the backyard. So, I mean, you can only do so much in a twenty-by-thirty backyard."

The rare instances when Gove County residents feel that their security has been compromised are always blamed on the effect of outside influences. A Gove City homemaker told of a drug raid at the high school, quickly assuring me that it "was not people from around here" but outsiders from California looking for a place to set up a methamphetamine lab. As she explained, the creation of I-70 had brought more crime into the community. "When they made that, we'd get things that we really didn't want." A Quinter businessman agreed:

> Well, we've had a storeowner murdered at Grainfield. That would have been in like '85, '86, somewhere in there. That never would have happened without interstate. There are people that come off interstate and fill their car with gas and take off. And I'm not saying that didn't [used to] happen, because we were on Highway 40. . . . I would guess that when I was a teenager, if somebody pulled in here, and they were from the state of Kansas, they could have written a check and been trusted that it was good. Today, you wouldn't hear of it.

Because Gove residents associate crime with outsiders, they have been reluctant to encourage them to come into the community. I-70 is underdeveloped throughout the county, with no truck stops and hardly any advertising. It is a material manifestation of distrust of influences from outside the county.[13]

You Trust Everybody Else and They Trust You

Gove County residents feel that their strong sense of community creates an honesty and integrity that cannot be found in more urban areas. A semiretired farmer who lives west of Gove City explained how he has come to rely on the integrity of his peers:

> I still sell wheat by calling a guy up and saying I want to sell some wheat. . . . And I've sold wheat as little as two years ago that I called them up and said, "I want to sell wheat, and this is the price." And he knew and I knew that that was the price. . . . We didn't even worry about it. It wasn't even a shake of a hand. And I knew that there was no way, if the price went way down, I was still going to get that, and he knew if the price went way up, I was going to sell for that. I mean, there was just trust. And you don't have that in a city. Do you?

A rancher south of Gove City put it this way: "I think you're dealing with people you can trust, for the most part. They're pretty honest, and I like their work ethic. You can do business with

most of them without involving five lawyers. Handshake still means something in this part of the world."

Perhaps the sense of community trust in Gove County stems not just from familiarity but from a prevalent panopticism—the sense that the community is watching. Most of my informants would argue that that is not a bad thing. When asked if everyone knowing everything about their neighbors is good or bad, the semiretired Gove City farmer replied, "Well, I don't think it's really negative. How much positive is in it? It does keep [people] a little bit more honest. . . . You wouldn't jab your neighbor, and it keeps you more neighborly. I think it probably does."

The Quinter businessman interviewed believed that the idea of everybody watching actually gave Gove County residents a greater integrity, because they didn't have to rely on a legal code to keep themselves in line. He explained his point using a reference to rules on a golf course, stating that they didn't need rules to prohibit drinking on the course at the local "Cow Paddy Golf Club" because the residents would simply know that someone would see them doing it and that was enough of a deterrent.

A teacher from Wheatland Elementary joked about this idea of constant community surveillance. "And sometimes that's good, and sometimes that's not [chuckles]. So, you know, people know who goes to visit who and when and how long you stayed and what kind of milk you drink. . . . if you leave tips at the café or not [laughs]. It's just, you know, you know everything about everybody."

Not everyone viewed the panopticism in Gove County as one of its strengths. A Gove County expatriate who has lived in Topeka for over thirty years did not remember that feeling of constant scrutiny with fondness. "Your immediate sense is that everybody is looking over your shoulder. When you're young, you seek the anonymous nature of the larger whole. It's just, that's just as natural as can be. And so I didn't miss that at all. That's what I wanted to leave and get away from."

A Quinter housewife, who in our interview expressed a genuine fondness for her town and the social life she had been able to develop there, surprised me when she said that she and her doctor husband would probably not stay there after he retired. Her explanation reflected ambivalence about the nature of small communities: "I loved raising kids here. But, you know, sometimes your home can get kind of . . . the walls can kind of close in. So I want to go somewhere where you can not feel like you have to wave to every car that goes by. And just [be] a little more anonymous."

In addition to the constant scrutiny of others, some residents noted that the small size of the Gove County communities can cause issues for those who step outside the bounds that the community feels are normal or appropriate. A physician at the Gove County Medical Center in Quinter and husband of the woman quoted above worried for children who don't fit in:

> Sometimes, I think kids probably get a little bit ostracized if they don't fit in with a group. There's not enough people for each individual to be a little sect in the class. And some people, I think, become outsiders in the class. And that's a sad thing. And kids are kind of mean. No matter where you go, kids are mean to each other. Then the teenage years are tough years for anybody to live through, no matter where you go, where [you] live.

One resident found herself part of a feud that resulted in the division of one of the churches in Gove City. A long-time member of the community, she is now ostracized to the point that she feels she will not be able to use the city's senior center when she retires because most of its patrons will hail from the other church. As she explained:

> It's very painful, it really is. . . . Their church gets out before ours on Sunday. And so, for us to go to the café on Sunday takes a lot of courage, because it's full of *them* [emphasis

FIG. 3. *Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Park. Aside from grain elevators, the various churches of Gove County are by far the most prominent buildings in the county.* Photograph by the author.

> added]. That's terrible to say that, but I mean, we walk in the door. . . . everybody gets quiet and it's just, "Hi." "Hi." "How are you?" "Fine." It's really strained. And you know, unless you went through it with us, there's no way you can understand it. And it's going to be like that until we die.

Long-term grudges can also play a role in local politics. The semiretired farmer in Gove City told me of how local businessmen find it impossible to serve on government committees because county residents will stop patronizing their stores if they vote against their preferences:

> A guy that's a businessman can't be on the school board anymore. 'Cuz they found it out that if you make somebody mad, he'll drive a hundred miles to [do] business, but not with you. And [in] rural America you can't do that. But they don't realize it. But you can't do it, you can't. Not a maybe, it's you can't.

THEY TAKE PROBLEMS BY THE HORNS AND GET THINGS DONE

Despite the occasional rift, a strong spirit of volunteerism exists in the various communities of Gove County. Most frequently it was cited in moments when neighbors were going through difficult situations and the community lent a hand. Kathleen Norris has written that rural inhabitants like to remind themselves that they live in a caring community in order to "keep [their] hopes up in a hard climate or hard times: and it gives [them] a sense of identity."[14] Presumably, this identity is one of people who still care for others in a world that they view as becoming more numb and callused every day. One county resident, who grew up in suburban

Bonner Springs but moved to Quinter with her husband, remembered the moment when her attachment to Quinter was cemented:

> Our oldest son was killed in an accident here. Then you couldn't leave. . . . because the community was so supportive of us during that time. It was two years after we'd moved here. And I know I couldn't have even thought about moving, because, you know, our kids, the only people they'd ever known really were here. . . . I don't think I cooked a meal for six months because people brought in food. And I was never alone. That was just such a support system.

A woman in Gove City explained where that type of volunteerism comes from:

> I think our morals and our principles were ingrained in us when we were very young. And I think it's shaped us into giving people, where everybody helps one another. I grew up in a time where neighbors helped neighbors, and it's just still kind of that kind of a community. And we've seen heartbreak for people, illnesses and death, and I think it makes you realize, you know, that you aren't the only person on this earth. I think it sort of makes you more kind and more caring.

She also said that the sense of volunteerism in Gove manifested itself in farming as well as in town. For communities as small as those in Gove County, it is imperative that people cooperate:

> It's just always been kind of like a community. You know, the neighbors helping one another. There's still some of that that goes on, not as much as in the past, but there's . . . well, like us cutting the ensilage with Bob and his boy. And they trade implements back and forth. Or if somebody needs help working cattle or combining or whatever, the help's usually always there, which is nice, 'cuz you never know when you might need it yourself, from illness, or death, or whatever.

A teacher at Wheatland Elementary saw the volunteerism of Gove residents as both a blessing and a curse. She cited the preparations for a recent festival as an example, where volunteers worked together to fix up the area for the event, even going so far as to buy new playground materials from a consolidated school in a nearby county:

> But, you know, they scraped, they painted, donated paint, and you know, the children just had a blast! Well, there would have been grants available for that, if somebody would have taken the time to figure it out and do it. But that's one thing, you know, we're stubborn. "Well, yeah, we can get this done, so we'll just do it ourselves. We're independent."

While volunteerism clearly reflects what the residents see as their hardworking nature, it also limits their willingness or ability to seek outside help, preventing what could be more long-term gains for the county. Norris has summed up the effects of this go-getter attitude: "There are so few people for so many jobs that we tend to call on whoever seems the most likely to do the job well. This has its bad side, as capable people can find that they are doing too much. It can also lead to mediocrity."[15] Norris might have substituted the word "capable" with "willing," as one resident told me that approximately 20 percent of the county's population was really willing to regularly lend a hand.

A Hardworking Community

Residents of Gove County seem especially proud of their self-perception as hard workers. This is perhaps best represented by a standard story you hear when asking residents about the community's strengths. The story always centers on people outside the region valuing the work ethic of people from western Kansas. One gets the sense that these stories are rural legends passed down from generation to generation. Some will frame the story as a son or daughter who got a job just because he or she

was from western Kansas. One informant told me he knew of a company in the eastern part of the state that centered all its hiring on western Kansans. A parent told the story in the form of a counselor from Kansas State University who sought her out to ask what they did in Quinter to produce such fine students. All my respondents took it as undisputed fact that residents of western Kansas were known throughout the state as hard workers. They also agreed on the origins of this trait. As the rancher south of Gove City explained:

> In our environment, there was never an off time. We knew that if we weren't in school or doing something, we'd be helping around the place. I guess I was working beside my father when I was, like I say, six or seven years old. . . . We knew that during the summer there wasn't a question of what we were gonna do, or would there be a job. We just saddled up and got after it. We farmed, we worked cattle. . . . So we were one of the guys from the time we were seven years old.

In addition to making themselves employable, some informants saw other benefits to growing up in an agricultural community. The semiretired Gove City farmer felt that it helped people learn how to think and reason. "Well, I'd say the big thing is they learn how to work. They learn how to think, oh, much greater than they do in these cities. There's a broader learning curve, really." He also felt it was important to tell me (though not in a bragging way) about how others from his high school class had achieved success outside the community. It was only from his brother that I learned about the farmer's own success: "My god, he [his brother] has assets that make my life look like I hadn't done a whole lot."

Others told me that the pragmatism of Gove County residents came from "knowing where your food comes from." They felt dealing rationally from day to day with the production side of human consumption let farmers and farming communities be more pragmatic about many things in life.

It seemed more important to my informants that I learned how residents of Gove County did when they left western Kansas than how current residents were doing. They measured success by locations, most frequently Manhattan or Kansas City, that were decidedly not rural. The important information wasn't just that Gove County residents and western Kansans were hardworking. The crucial information was that they were considered more hardworking than their eastern counterparts, that firms in places like Kansas City so valued their labor and values over those of people from other more urban places that they would center their hiring on people from western Kansas.

Geographer James Shortridge has described modern Midwesterners as having an inferiority complex.[16] Over the history of its existence, the region has been alternatingly celebrated and denigrated to the point that residents no longer know how to feel about themselves. The residents of Gove County are keenly aware that modern America, embodied in places such as Kansas City, perceives the western portion of the state as anachronistic and old-fashioned. Confronted with closing farms and a steady outflow of population, they find it important for their sense of self-worth to know that their lifestyle produces something that it still universally valued. Having stories of success, especially over those perceived as more urbane or modern, represents a vindication of their communities and chosen lifestyle.

They Don't Have Deep Roots Here

In addition to celebrating the success of denizens of Gove abroad, my informants told me stories about the effects of an influx of new blood into the area. In one conversation, an area teacher went quickly from rhetorically asking me, "Who wants to move to Gove County? There's nothing there" to the following discussion of how students from outside the county have begun to be a drain on local schools:

> We always have a joke here at school that we must have good welfare benefits. Because

> a lot of times the people that come are the ones that are on welfare. And it might be relatives of somebody that, you know, lives here. Or somebody's friend lives here and they heard of it and thought it sounds like a nice place to live. . . . You hate to classify people, but I'd say the last five families that we have gotten students in our school district, that I have been associated with, out of those five families, probably four of their children were special-needs children. You know, whether it was learning problems or physical problems, they needed special help. And, you know, we do our best to offer what we can.

Another informant who works in the schools believed that a lot of the problems from children who come from outside rural western Kansas have to do with a lack of values in their families. Her husband, a teacher and coach at Wheatland High School, talked about how the other coaches in the area had noticed a decline in the toughness and work ethic of the high school students in the region. He explained it thusly:

> Yeah, I listened to a coach from Clifton. . . . They've had a lot of kids out for football year after year, but the coach said they're just not homegrown kids anymore. They're not that big, tough kid that we've had in the past, and their program has dropped from where it used to be. And I think that's probably where a lot of the small communities are. I wouldn't know what percentage, but a fourth to a third are kids who have moved in and just don't have the strong beliefs of what kids have grown up here with.

It is a common theme that families who have moved to Gove County from out of town have done so because they know or are related to someone in the area and are attracted to the local lifestyle. But the other half of this story is that these families are perceived to bring in problems that exist in urban areas. Almost any Gove County resident can list a host of these "city" problems. First and foremost, they are dangerous places. In the words of a Quinter businessman:

> I don't think we have the pressure that you see in the city, you know. And I think it's better, emotionally, if you can walk down the street and say hello to people, and they say hello back and don't give you a strange look. . . . But in the city, those people are probably not going to talk to you unless you talk to them. And it may irritate them that you talk to them. But I actually am apprehensive somewhat, when I'm in the city. And that's probably tainted from the stories about drive-by shootings and murders and that sort of thing that are probably never going to happen to me. I'll worry about stuff that's never going to happen.

A woman in Gove City explained to me that it was probably incredibly difficult to raise a family in a city:

> You know, because I know their crime rates and the things that go on there, and the gangs and stuff like that. So I guess I'm a person that wouldn't want to have to deal with all that stuff. You know, because I think, really, your adults deal with it too, especially if you have a family in a city. So I'm sure it's not easy to raise a family in a city. And it can be hard out here too, but I just think it's much more dangerous in a city. I guess that's my fear, is that it's just dangerous. You never know if somebody's going to shoot you walking down the street. . . . This is what I don't understand; they don't even know the people that they shoot. I don't understand their thinking, I guess, and the pain it causes people.

Both of these informants said their impressions of urban areas came primarily from the news, but also from visiting cities and from talking with friends and relatives who live there.

Hell on Women and Horses

Most of my informants argued that, for a person to be successful or even happy on the Great Plains, they had to be willing to go without most luxuries. They equated the required asceticism with males and masculinity, and in contrast, associated urban luxuries with women and femininity. The rancher south of Gove City summed up the idea during our interview when he told me the following:

> My mom, particularly, I think she would have probably been happy living in a more urban area. And that's been a big problem in this country. You're quite a ways removed from the more refined things of life. My grandfather coined a phrase early on, after he moved out here. In his opinion, this country was a good place to make a living, but it was hell on women and horses. And . . . I guess, fifty-seven years later, I'd have to say that I haven't changed my opinion of that much. It's . . . other than the fact that maybe it's not quite as good a place to make a living anymore as it used to be, but it's still hell on women and horses. So I guess it's tough to find women, anymore, that are willing to come back into this country due to lack of the amenities and distances to get to anywhere to shop.

He expressed this idea to me as he was explaining the difficulty in finding employees who would move to Gove County. "Finding males willing to come out here and work maybe isn't as difficult as finding women that will volunteer to stay with them. So that maybe tells you something. It's attractive maybe more to the male gender than the female."

As this was one of my first interviews, I sought to explore this idea (which I hadn't really considered before) in more detail with other informants. I was surprised to find agreement from both women and men. A Gove County housewife explained her reservations:

> Well, a lot of the women were raised in cities or near big towns and things like that, and I don't think they really know that much about a farming community. And we are at least an hour's drive away from shopping or going to the movies, or whatever the college presents, you know, plays and things like this. And I think when they're out here, they're not used to wide-open spaces, you know. And I think they really kind of feel like we're kind of barren out here. Maybe they feel like they're a little bit alone or something. I mean, they can't just go downtown to the Dairy Queen or whatever; they have to drive thirty minutes to get to different places. So I think that's a lot of it. It's just too barren and not enough action [laughs].

The doctor in Quinter felt that he had an easier time adapting to life on the Plains than his wife because it had more of what a man would be interested in. "But my wife—you'll find from talking to her, she doesn't have as many things to do. You know, she doesn't hunt, doesn't fish, doesn't play golf. So there's not much available."

In addition to pointing out the lack of amenities that most informants imagined necessary for female happiness (or at least urban female happiness), informants also noted a lack of opportunities for women professionally in Gove County. A female teacher offered a brief list of what jobs were available to women. It included working at one of the cafés, government office jobs, housekeeping, teaching, and being an assistant in the schools. Like much of rural America, the gendered division of labor is still strong in Gove County.[17]

A Quinter businessman felt that there were actually more professional opportunities for females than males in Gove County, but still believed that the area was less attractive to females. When asked whether he thought men were more willing than women to live and work in Gove County, he replied:

> I think there's probably some truth to that. I don't know if we have as many opportunities here for men as we have for women. Simply

> because of the hospital, because the nursing field and the technicians, the physical therapists. . . . So when you have a place that employs 180 people or whatever the current number is and they're primarily women, the opportunities are greater there. And, of course, the second one in town would be the school.

Clearly both of these informants have firm ideas about employment opportunities for females in Gove County. Interestingly enough, I found the jobs deemed as appropriate for men to be equally limited. During discussions on what could be done to keep young people in the county, a fairly consistent reply emerged for young males returning after college. This response was typical: "I would say for the sons, if your dad's a farmer and you're not interested in that at all, I don't think you'll come back." Gove County is seen as a farming county, and farming is deemed to be what men do there. Although the county certainly offers other positions, the vision that respondents have for men is purely that of farmer.

Effects of the Agrarian Place-Myth

The place-images listed above combine to show that western Kansas is dominated by an agricultural or pastoral place-myth that is constructed in contrast to more urban areas. The communities of the region are based around farming, and the citizens of those communities see that work as predominantly for men. Although female informants sometimes talked with pride of operating tractors, it was a secondary task, something to be done outside their regular, more feminine occupations. Because of the hegemonic power of this myth, Gove and western Kansas are seen by their residents as masculine places. Men can move into the county with some ease because it offers employment and diversions (hunting, fishing, golf) that males typically enjoy.

Women, on the other hand, are not seen as naturally inclined toward Gove County. If they have grown up there, then they are perceived to have received the benefits of a rural life (i.e., they are hardworking, they know where their food comes from, they know how to do without), and are trained to appreciate the area's agricultural lifestyle, and its wide-open, windswept landscape. Women who come from away, however, are seen as unequipped to deal with the asceticism necessary for life on the Plains. Because women do not fit into what is viewed as the primary job of the county, they are relegated to more traditionally feminine service jobs.

These gendered divisions of labor and their projection on the landscape are certainly not unique to Gove County, but I would argue that their impact is especially profound there because of the county's small size and limited opportunities. In a larger setting, an individual would simply seek out a place of employment that offered what he or she was looking for. But in Gove County, many people simply move away because those opportunities don't exist. As a result, the inability of residents to break out of their gendered conceptual binary is seriously deterring development. All the parents of daughters that I interviewed had at least one daughter who did not live in the county. The reasons offered for those departures were consistent: the daughter couldn't find a job in her profession of choice. Similarly, young men who were not interested in farming left because Gove County has not sought out other forms of industry to encourage them to stick around.

What is more, the hegemonic power of this place-myth has limited the ability of most Gove County residents to view the impact of the results of this gendering. Because they have decided that the lifestyle of Gove County is naturally appealing to and better for men, they can ascribe blame for the lack of new families to women's inability to deal with the harshness of the western Kansas landscape. Similarly, they believe that the men who leave the county do so because they either don't want to farm or have been precluded from doing so by government agricultural policies. And while residents recognize that people leave in pursuit of other

FIG. 4. *The Western Hotel and Restaurant in Grinnell. The Grinnell Grain elevator is in the background.* Photograph by the author.

opportunities, they view that loss as an inevitability rather than a result of their development choices. They cannot see around the limits that the gendered pastoral agrarian place-myth has placed on their communities.

Place-myths certainly can and do have positive aspects. It is beneficial to feel part of a community, for example, even more so if one feels that that community has worth and imparts beneficial social values onto its members. Gove County would be a much grimmer place if all residents believed as one expatriate does: "Growing up in a rural environment or a small town doesn't necessarily give you the assets [to be successful]." Gove County residents gain from believing they get something special out of living and working in an agricultural setting. I have no doubt that a true sense of community exists for residents of Gove County, and that many of the residents there are hardworking and honest. But problems arise when these qualities are deemed to be unique to the region. It seems to have produced xenophobia. Gove County residents are certainly friendly to outsiders, but they are not particularly interested in attracting new residents or industries, especially if those new residents or industries don't fit into their agrarian place-myth. When they vote down proposals for industry, it is frequently for one of two fears: the industry will not fit with the pastoral values of the county, or the industry will attract undesirable new workers from outside the area.

While it is fair to view the introduction of new industry with a certain degree of skepticism, it is also easy to empathize with the county commissioner whose frustration was palpable as he detailed the various types of industry that had recently been voted down by the county's residents:

> That's one of the things as a county commissioner today that maybe is a little frustrating. At this point in time, with the

> labor base that we have or don't have, and the infrastructure that we have possibly to attract any businesses or retain people, we're going to have to accept some industries that in some people's viewpoints have maybe too many downside attributes. Over the past several years there've been some businesses proposed to bring into this county that have pretty much been voted down. Because of people's perceptions of the downside of the business. [They] apparently don't want corporate farming in the way of hog farms that would bring in possibly foreign workers of any type. [There was another] proposal to bring in a holding facility for prisoners. This was vetoed in no uncertain terms. There was no desire to have anything like that in the county. A large trash, waste-handling facility has been proposed, and was not warmly received. Just several things of this nature.

He was not the only one to complain about a lack of vision in the community. A younger couple expressed similar frustrations with the voting for a potential correctional facility:

> Husband: There's a lot of people that would like it, but on their terms.
> Wife: Yeah, I think any job created in our county is a good job. And I don't have a problem with it being a prison. There are plenty of people around here that could use a job like that. Burlington, Colorado, thrives off of their correctional facility. And it's right by interstate. You know, we've got plenty of open space out here, and I'm sure there are farmers willing to sell their ground. They can make their buck, and we can make money for our county.

Presumably the terms that the couple mentioned in their response had to do only with attracting rural people for agricultural jobs. But as the county commissioner noted, even the agricultural jobs have to fit a certain model. Agriculture in Gove County is considered a family endeavor, not a corporate one. Corporate farming certainly has its detractors all over the United States, but in Gove County it carries connotations of cities and industry, and is therefore not welcome. In addition, such farms are thought to attract new workers from outside the area. And as we have seen, the people of Gove County distrust new people from outside western Kansas because they see them as lazy, potentially seeking welfare benefits, and generally contributing to a decline in the values of the community.

The agrarian place-myth in Gove County is so strong that many residents see the region's decline strictly in agricultural terms. Several farmers I interviewed blamed a large part of the county's decline on certain farmers in the community putting their land into the government's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). CRP land is left fallow for extended periods so that native grasses and wildlife can return to it. Many experts see it as a good way to slow agricultural overproduction and protect marginal land, but several of the farmers I talked to had negative feelings toward the CRP because they viewed it as preventing young farmers from being able to get into agriculture. This response was typical:

> They say, "Oh, it really doesn't hurt nothin'." And I got a neighbor that did it, that, oh, lives ten, fifteen miles away. . . . Well, what do you mean it really doesn't? Here's fuel. He's not buying fuel to farm, so some fuel dealer out here, he's cut back that much. Well, he's not buying fertilizer. He's not buying seed. He's not buying repairs. And all these people that they're talking about, so they don't employ as many people. And there's some ground that needs to be in CRP, don't get me wrong, these rough hillsides. But they're putting in good, real good land in the CRP. And they're putting it in, [that's] what's killing as far as rural Kansas, our rural community here. You got a young guy that's wanting to farm, and they're putting this ground, that section right here east of it, this ground is in for over 40 dollars an acre, cash rent. And the cash rent price on

> it would be thirty to thirty-five dollars an acre. And the government outbid this young farmer. Now, do you think that's good for Gove County?

An older resident of Grainfield felt that much of the decline in population for Gove County was caused by negative attitudes toward farming. As he told me, "Some of the reason we're losing population is definitely attitude." He then proceeded to provide numerous examples where a farmer who was successful had been able to keep his children in the area, whereas farmers who complained and groused about farming usually went out of business and their children moved away. To one farmer, who admitted that "not everybody can farm," the only problem in Gove County was that people did not realize or had forgotten how successful they could be farming, and had failed to teach their children that.

It is interesting that men like the two just mentioned, who can be pragmatic about issues such as school consolidation, supporting the hospital, and the need to shop locally, are still trapped in the hegemonic hold of the pastoral place-myth when it comes to imagining development in the county. This illustrates the power of a place-myth. Not only does it resist change over time, it can also limit the vision people have for a place. I began this investigation under the assumption that continuing demographic and economic decline in the rural Great Plains would have had a negative effect on the region's sense of place and self-esteem. I did not find that to be the case. As shown above, residents of Gove County continue to associate their communities with values similar to those of the Jeffersonian agrarianism first espoused in the eighteenth century. If anything, residents are more intent on seeing value and uniqueness in their lifestyles as their communities shrink in size. I argue that the determination to view these values as existing in direct opposition to more urban areas has kept Gove County from seeking out potentially beneficial development.

It is important to clarify that I am not arguing that the agrarian place-myth of Gove County is solely or even primarily responsible for the area's decline. Gove County is but a tiny node in a vast cultural and economic web, and in some ways it has little influence over its own progress. Its residents cannot control how the government decides to reimburse for Medicaid and Medicare. Its farmers cannot control wheat prices or the speed of agricultural technological development. These and numerous other factors operate at a far larger scale.

In some ways, migration exacerbates the problem of underdevelopment for Gove because it does not force the issue of attracting new forms of industry. Since little unemployment exists in Gove County (only 3.2 percent), why should residents push for more industry? As a member of local government pointed out to me, "A factory will move in if you're in desperation, [if you have] unemployment that hell wouldn't have it. They'll come in. You don't bring them in. They will not come in if you don't have unemployment." So they cannot attract a light industry on their own that might turn their decline around.

Social spatialization in Shields's theory is not a base causal factor for the marginalization of places, but it is a contributing one. Ample evidence exists that this is the case in Gove County. Whereas it is almost impossible to attract major industry there, the agrarian place-myth has definitely stopped residents from welcoming smaller enterprises that would have brought new people to the area. Even if these newcomers did not celebrate agrarian values, they certainly would have increased the county's dwindling tax base. Similarly, if Gove County residents had viewed their population exodus not as having solely to do with people not wanting to farm, but as a lack of something more in the community, they might have sought to add whatever industry or cultural amenities they could. How many decisions over the course of the county's history have been made based on this place-myth? How might their present situation be different if they had made different decisions?

NOTES

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2. For an assessment of the impact of economic changes on the Plains, see Brian Page, "Across the Great Divide: Agriculture and Industrial Geography," *Economic Geography* 72, no. 4 (1996): 376–97; Rebecca Roberts, "Recasting the Agrarian Question: The Reproduction of Family Farming on the Southern High Plains," *Economic Geography* 72, no. 4 (1996): 398–415; Brian Page and Richard Walker, "From Settlement to Fordism: The Agro-Industrial Revolution in the American Midwest," *Economic Geography* 67, no. 4 (1991): 281–315; Frederick H. Buttel, "Continuities and Disjunctures in the Transformation of the U.S. Agro-Food System," in Brown and Swanson, *Challenges for Rural America*, 177–89; Phillip McMichael, "The Impact of Global Economic Practices on American Farming," in Brown and Swanson, *Challenges for Rural America*, 375–84; Stephen J. Goetz and David L. Debertin, "Rural Population Decline in the 1980s: Impacts of Farm Structure and Federal Farm Programs," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 78, no. 3 (1996): 517–29. For an assessment of the impact of cultural pressure on rural residents, see Margaret Alston, "'You Don't Want to Be a Check-out Chick All Your Life': The Out-Migration of Young People from Australia's Small Rural Towns," *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 39, no. 3 (2004): 299–313; Karen Valby, "Welcome to Utopia," *Entertainment Weekly*, August 25, 2006, http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1333721,00.html; Charlie LeDuff and Patricia Smith, "Travis's Dilemma," Up Front, *New York Times*, November 27, 2006.

3. Rob Shields, *Places on the Margins: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1991). Further citations to *Places on the Margin* are given in parentheses in the text.

4. Alessandro Portelli, "Oral History as Genre," in *Narrative and Genre*, ed. Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompsen, 23–45 (London: Routledge, 1998).

5. For more on conducting and interpreting interviews, see Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998); Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey, "Interviewing: The Art of Science," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 361–76 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994); and Kent C. Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993).

6. Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, 86.

7. James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989).

8. Ibid., 79.

9. See William Least Heat-Moon, *PrairyErth* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1991); James R. Dickenson, *Home on the Range* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995); Dayton Duncan, *Miles from Nowhere* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

10. Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

11. For a full explanation of the Buffalo Commons idea, see Deborah E. Popper and Frank J. Popper, "The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust," *Planning* 53, no. 12 (December 1987): 12–19; Robert E. Lang, Deborah E. Popper and Frank J. Popper. "Is There Still a Frontier? The 1890 US Census and the Modern American West," *Journal of Rural Studies* 13, no. 4 (1997): 377–86; Deborah E. Popper and Frank J. Popper, "The Buffalo Commons: Metaphor as Method," *Geographical Review* 89, no. 4 (1999): 491–510; and Deborah E. Popper and Frank J. Popper, "Small Can Be Beautiful," *Planning* 68, no. 7 (2002): 20–23. For a journalistic account of the Poppers presenting their ideas to Plains residents, see Ann Matthews, *Where the Buffalo Roam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

12. Because human beings rarely speak in grammatically correct ways, I have edited some quotations for the sake of readability. Usually, this meant removing unfinished thoughts or vocal tics such as "um," "you know," or "I mean." I have tried to be sensitive to the intended meanings of my informants, and so have probably erred on the side of caution when deciding what to keep in or remove.

13. Richard H. Schein, "The Place of Landscape: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting an American Scene," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87, no. 4 (1997): 660–80.

14. Norris, *Dakota*, 73.

15. Ibid., 118.

16. Shortridge, *The Middle West*.

17. Ann R. Tickamyer and Debra A. Henderson, "Rural Women: New Roles for the New Century?" in Brown and Swanson, *Challenges for Rural America*, 109–17; Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity, and Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).